

\$30,000 rumor? Tabloid paid for, spiked, salacious Trump tip

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NEW YORK (AP) — Eight months before the company that owns the National Enquirer paid \$150,000 to a former Playboy Playmate who claimed she'd had an affair with Donald Trump, the tabloid's parent made a \$30,000 payment to a less famous individual: a former doorman at one of the real estate mogul's New York City buildings.

As it did with the ex-Playmate, the Enquirer signed the ex-doorman to a contract that effectively prevented him from going public with a juicy tale that might hurt Trump's campaign for president.

The payout to the former Playmate, Karen McDougal, stayed a secret until The Wall Street Journal published a story about it days before Election Day. Since then curiosity about that deal has spawned intense media coverage and, this week, helped prompt the FBI to raid the hotel room and offices of Trump's personal lawyer, Michael Cohen.

The story of the ex-doorman, Dino Sajudin, hasn't been told until now.

The Associated Press confirmed the details of the Enquirer's payment through a review of a confidential contract and interviews with dozens of current and former employees of the Enquirer and its parent company, American Media Inc. Sajudin got \$30,000 in exchange for signing over the rights, "in perpetuity," to a rumor he'd heard about Trump's sex life — that the president had fathered a child with an employee at Trump World Tower, a skyscraper he owns near the United Nations. The contract

subjected Sajudin to a \$1 million penalty if he disclosed either the rumor or the terms of the deal to anyone.

Cohen, the longtime Trump attorney, acknowledged to the AP that he had discussed Sajudin's story with the magazine when the tabloid was working on it. He said he was acting as a Trump spokesman when he did so and denied knowing anything beforehand about the Enquirer payment to the ex-doorman.

The parallel between the ex-Playmate's and the ex-doorman's dealings with the Enquirer raises new questions about the roles that the Enquirer and Cohen may have played in protecting Trump's image during a hard-fought presidential election. Prosecutors are probing whether Cohen broke banking or campaign laws in connection with AMI's payment to McDougal and a \$130,000 payment to porn star Stormy Daniels that Cohen said he paid out of his own pocket.

Federal investigators have sought communications between Cohen, American Media's chief executive and the Enquirer's top editor, the New York Times reported. And on Thursday, the government watchdog group Common Cause filed complaints with the Justice Department and the Federal Election Commission, asking authorities to investigate whether the payment violated campaign finance laws.

Cohen's lawyer has called the raids "inappropriate and unnecessary." American Media hasn't said whether federal authorities have sought information from it, but said this week that it would "comply with any and all requests that do not jeopardize or violate its protected sources or materials pursuant to our First Amendment rights."

The White House didn't respond to questions seeking comment.

On Wednesday, an Enquirer sister publication, RadarOnline, published details of the payment and the rumor that Sajudin was peddling. The website wrote that the Enquirer spent four weeks reporting the story but ultimately decided it wasn't true. The company only released Sajudin from his contract after the 2016 election amid inquiries from the Journal about the payment. The site noted that the AP was among a group of publications that had been investigating the ex-doorman's tip.

During AP's reporting, AMI threatened legal action over reporters' efforts to interview current and former employees and hired the New York law firm Boies Schiller Flexner, which challenged the accuracy of the AP's reporting.

Asked about the payment last summer, Dylan Howard, the Enquirer's top editor and an AMI executive, said he made the payment to secure the former Trump doorman's exclusive cooperation because the tip, if true, would have sold "hundreds of thousands" of magazines. Ultimately, he said the information "lacked any credibility," so he spiked the story on those merits.

"Unfortunately ... Dino Sajudin is one fish that swam away," Howard told RadarOnline on Wednesday.

But four longtime Enquirer staffers directly familiar with the episode challenged Howard's version of events. They said they were ordered by top editors to stop pursuing the story before completing potentially promising reporting threads.

They said the publication didn't pursue standard Enquirer reporting practices, such as exhaustive stakeouts or tabloid tactics designed to prove paternity. In 2008, the Enquirer helped bring down presidential hopeful John Edwards in part by digging through a dumpster and retrieving material to do a DNA test that indicated he had fathered a child with a mistress, according to a former staffer.

The woman at the center of the rumor about Trump denied emphatically to the AP last August that she'd ever had an affair with Trump, saying she had no idea the Enquirer had paid Sajudin and pursued his tip.

The AP has not been able to determine if the rumor is true and is not naming the woman.

"This is all fake," she said. "I think they lost their money."

The Enquirer staffers, all with years of experience negotiating source contracts, said the abrupt end to reporting combined with a binding, seven-figure penalty to stop the tipster from talking to anyone led them to conclude that this was a so-called "catch and kill" — a tabloid practice in which a publication pays for a story to never run, either as a favor to the celebrity subject of the tip or as leverage over that person.

One former Enquirer reporter, who was not involved in the Sajudin reporting effort, expressed skepticism that the company would pay for the tip and not publish.

"AMI doesn't go around cutting checks for \$30,000 and then not using the information," said Jerry George, a reporter and senior editor for nearly three decades at AMI before his layoff in 2013.

The company said that AMI's publisher, David Pecker, an unabashed Trump supporter, had not coordinated its coverage with Trump associates or taken direction from Trump. It acknowledged discussing the former doorman's tip with Trump's representatives, which it described as "standard operating procedure in stories of this nature."

The Enquirer staffers, like many of the dozens of other current and former AMI employees interviewed by the AP in the past year, spoke on condition of anonymity. All said AMI required them to sign nondisclosure agreements barring them from discussing internal editorial policy and decision-making.

Though sometimes dismissed by mainstream publications, the Enquirer's history of breaking legitimate scoops about politicians' personal lives — including its months-

long Pulitzer Prize-contending coverage of presidential candidate Edwards' affair — is a point of pride in its newsroom.

During the 2016 presidential campaign, the Enquirer published a string of allegations against Trump's rivals, such as stories claiming Democratic rival Hillary Clinton was a bisexual "secret sex freak" and was kept alive only by a "narcotics cocktail."

Stories attacking Trump rivals or promoting Trump's campaign often bypassed the paper's normal fact-checking process, according to two people familiar with campaign-era copy.

The tabloid made its first-ever endorsement by officially backing Trump for the White House. With just over a week before Election Day, Howard, the top editor, appeared on Alex Jones' InfoWars program by phone, telling listeners that the choice at the ballot box was between "the Clinton crime family" or someone who will "break down the borders of the establishment." Howard said the paper's coverage was bipartisan, citing negative stories it published about Ben Carson during the Republican presidential primaries.

In a statement last summer, Howard said the company doesn't take editorial direction "from anyone outside AMI," and said Trump has never been an Enquirer source. The company has said reader surveys dictate its coverage and that many of its customers are Trump supporters.

The company has said it paid McDougal, the former Playboy Playmate, to be a columnist for an AMI-published fitness magazine, not to stay silent. McDougal has since said that she regrets signing the non-disclosure agreement and is currently suing to get out of it.

Pecker has denied burying negative stories about Trump, but acknowledged to the New Yorker last summer that McDougal's contract had effectively silenced her.

"Once she's part of the company, then on the outside she can't be bashing Trump and American Media," Pecker said.

In the tabloid world purchasing information is not uncommon, and the Enquirer routinely pays sources. As a general practice, however, sources agree to be paid for their tips only upon publication.

George, the longtime former reporter and editor, said the \$1 million penalty in Sajudin's agreement was larger than anything he had seen in his Enquirer career.

"If your intent is to get a story from the source, there's no upside to paying upfront," said George, who sometimes handled catch-and-kill contracts related to other celebrities. Paying upfront was not the Enquirer's usual practice because it would have been costly and endangered the source's incentive to cooperate, he said.

After initially calling the Enquirer's tip line, Sajudin signed a boilerplate contract with the Enquirer, agreeing to be an anonymous source and be paid upon publication.

The Enquirer dispatched reporters to pursue the story both in New York and in California. The tabloid also sent a polygraph expert to administer a lie detection test to Sajudin in a hotel near his Pennsylvania home.

Sajudin passed the polygraph, which tested how he learned of the rumor. One week later, Sajudin signed an amended agreement, this one paying him \$30,000 immediately and subjecting him to the \$1 million penalty if he shopped around his information.

The Enquirer immediately then stopped reporting, said the former staffers.

Cohen, last year, characterized the Enquirer's payment to Sajudin as wasted money for a baseless story.

For his part, Sajudin confirmed he'd been paid to be the tabloid's anonymous source but insisted he would sue the Enquirer if his name appeared in print. Pressed for more details about his tip and experience with the paper, Sajudin said he would talk only in exchange for payment.

"If there's no money involved with it," he said, "I'm not getting involved."

Horwitz reported from Washington.